Civil Service Reform and Popular Government

Address by

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For ten years past the American people has been manifesting in many ways a determination to win back for the voters that direct control over public action of which representative government as administered by political bosses and machines controlling party organizations had robbed it. This determination of the people has found expression in much new legislation. It seized on the referendum as a means of preventing the frauds and robberies perpetrated by elected officials in the gift, sale, or lease, of valuable franchises to public utility corporations. It utilized the initiative as a means of supplementing the slow, ineffective action of state legislatures and municipal councils. It proposed the recall as a means of getting rid of dishonest or inefficient public officers who had been imposed on the people by powerful bosses and rings. The rapid spread of the commission form of government, invented at Galveston, has been due to the conviction on the part of the people of more than one hundred and fifty cities that under that form they could rid themselves of the corrupt bands of professional politicians, which had made municipal government in the United States a by-word for inefficiency and dishonesty. Again, the people seeking for deliverance from the rule of nominating conventions managed by party bosses and their henchmen, set up party primaries as a hopeful substitute for conventions; and as fast as they learn by trial that party primaries can be managed by the bosses and machines almost as easily as conventions and caucuses were, they prepare to face the adoption of other means of defense, such as open nominations, the preliminary election, and the short ballot.

Still another manifestation of the people's determination to resume the power they have lost through the perversion of their representative institutions is their insistence on the direct election of United States senators.

The strength, large scope, and firm persistence of this popular determination cannot be doubted; and yet it has never struck at the root of the complete evil it is trying to remedy. That root is the money which the political machines control through the spoils method of appointment to salaried places in the civil service of the United States, the states and the cities.

The civil service reform to which this League has been devoted for thirty years is important as a means of increasing the efficiency of the public service, through the methods of inquiry and testing which secure appointments for good capacity and character; but it is vastly more important as the essential means of wresting from the bosses and machines the power to nominate and elect public officers, of restoring this power to the people, and so of improving throughout the country the conditions of political activity and public life. Civil service reform strikes at the root of the evil against which the American people has been struggling somewhat blindly—its loss of control over public affairs—by taking away the machines' means of subsistence. It is their grip on the vast total of the salaries paid to public officers appointed by the patronage method and on the personal services of such officers, which maintains the bosses, rings and machines. The patron expects the personal service and support of his appointees, and in the common estimation has a good claim on their time, and for party uses on the salaries he has procured for them. Officials who owe their places to a boss or a ring will always pay their debts in work for the party of the patron and for the patron himself and in contributions for campaign expenses. To do so is their personal interest.

Here is an immense fund of labor and money, much of which can be concealed, to be spent on accomplishing the purposes and prolonging the power of the senators, congressmen, governors, mayors and state, county, or city elected representatives and officials who control all the appointments not made on the merit system. Every political machine subsists on its patronage, and every boss maintains his bossdom at the public expense by appropriating the time of public servants which the public is

paying for, and parts of numerous salaries paid from the public treasury.

A patron is valuable in proportion to the length of his term of office, to his political prestige, and to his effectiveness in procuring and shrewdness in using opportunities to make appointments. A United States senator is a more desirable patron than a member of the House of Representatives; a four-year governor or mayor than a two-year; a permanent county official than one elected for a year or two. The most effective bosses have been men who held no office, but built up a durable power by skillful use, year after year, of the great patronage fund of services and money, reinforced by the contributions of persons and corporations who wished to buy or buy off legislation, and found it better to deal with one efficient boss than with numerous corruptible individuals.

The way to destroy root and branch this abominable product of the Jacksonian spoils doctrine is to extend the merit system of appointment to all national, state, and city offices. By so doing, the whole country would not only obtain much better service in all public offices, but also purify all its political life, and restore to the people the control of the public business.

How much progress towards this consummation has been made during the thirty years life of this League? Encouraging progress in regard to the subordinate places with low salaries, very little in regard to the higher grades with salaries worth assessing for political purposes. In the national civil service about 230,000* places are in the competitive classified service, and the holders of these places are under no obligations to any patron and are prohibited from taking active part "in political management or political campaigns." On the other hand, nearly all the superior offices, having good or high salaries, are still filled by the patronage method. With few exceptions, the incumbents are indebted for their places to

*According to the last report of the United States Commission 227,657. This is exclusive, however, of about 25,000 navy yard mechanics and 6,500 laborers subject to competitive regulations but not strictly speaking in the competitive classified service.

some senator, congressman, party committee, or private referee, and feel it a duty to work for their patron on demand.

Over appointments to the higher salaried offices, which can only be filled "by and with the advice and consent of the Senate," that body has control; but under the practice called "the courtesy of the Senate" that control has passed to the individual senators of the dominant party. These higher offices cannot be classified under the civil service act of 1883 "unless by direction of the Senate."

The patronage power of senators and representatives is fully recognized by each successive administration—never more frankly than by the present—and accordingly postmasters of every grade (except fourth-class postmasters north of the Ohio and Potomac and east of the Mississippi), collectors of customs or internal revenue, United States district-attorneys, and marshals are all patronage appointees, owing and paying allegiance and service to the person or persons who procured their appointment. Many of these office-holders are able men skilled in political management and more industrious in such work than in their proper functions.

The average political appointee performs comparatively little service for the government. He was not appointed because of fitness and he rarely makes himself fit. The work of his office is done by his subordinates, most of whom to-day belong to the competitive classified service. Except at Washington and a few other cities the spoils offices could be left vacant without any serious impairment of the service. Nothing could be more unbusinesslike and wasteful than the present mode of filling the higher places in the civil service; but the wastefulness of the spoils method is of little moment compared with its corrupting effect on the political life of the people.

The civil service of the states and cities is on the whole not so far advanced towards a sound merit system of appointment as that of the nation, although a few states have passed respectable laws, and a few cities have made strong efforts to secure a service free from political influences and selected for fitness only. The numerous

cities which have adopted the commission form of government have frequently procured the insertion in the new charter of an article providing a merit system for the selection of the city's servants; but these provisions have not all been well designed to secure the end in view. Some of the civil service commissions established have not been independent themselves, others have been improperly constituted, and others still have been denied adequate appropriations. On the other hand, the State of New York and the city of Chicago have used the merit method of thorough inquiry and competitive examination with perfect success on candidates for well-paid positions as experts.

Under existing conditions office holders, national, state, or municipal, control party organizations and committees on credentials and resolutions dominate conventions, cut and dry primary elections and take care in good season of the membership of legislatures. The federal office-holder's machine, particularly active in the Southern States, is organized in Washington, and more than once a Cabinet officer has been the real head of it. It may easily hold the balance of power in the National Convention of the party in office, and so control both the nominations and the declarations of policy. State and city conventions often exhibit like phenomena.

How can the people rid themselves of this intolerable obstruction to the free exercise of their honest will? Only by extending the merit system of appointment to the entire civil services of the country, and establishing the general rule that civil servants are not to take active part in party management or political campaigns. Presidents Hayes, Cleveland and Roosevelt all protested against the political activity of civil servants; but their declarations produced little effect, until in 1907 President Roosevelt issued an effective order prohibiting persons in the *competitive classified service* from taking part in political management or in political campaigns. The enforcement of this order was entrusted to the National Civil Service Commission, which had no difficulty in enforcing it. Indeed the order was welcome to the subordinate employees

to whom it applied. The remedy for the great evil of boss, ring and machine management of politics is plainly indicated in the effect of President Roosevelt's order to the competitive classified service, namely, make the whole civil service of the country, national, state, and municipal, a competitive classified service, and prohibit political activity to civil servants. When all the superior offices as well as the subordinate are filled with men appointed or promoted for merit, the country will get from its servants the whole time it pays for, the mind of each servant will be in his work, and not in party politics, the service of a patron, and the preservation of his own place, and then the greatest hindrance to good government in the United States will have been done away with.

This is the goal of the National Civil Service Reform League. The League has every reason to be of good courage in the prosecution of its patriotic labors. The merit system, incomplete as it is, has proved its value wherever it has been applied. The effective order against political activity has proved to be welcome to 230,000 persons in the classified service of the United States. The President of the United States in his message to Congress last year practically recommended that the entire civil service of the national government, including the offices now filled with the advice and consent of the Senate, be placed on the merit system of appointment, with the exception only of "officers responsible for the policy of administration and their immediate personal assistants or deputies."

Until these recommendations are adopted civil service reform cannot demonstrate its full advantages. The best kind of young men will not enter a service, except for some temporary object, or will not remain in it, if they can have no access to its higher places. The civil service, national, state, and municipal, ought to offer a highly satisfactory career to energetic, ambitious, and patriotic young men. It has not for two generations.

The work which lies before the League will be even more beneficent than that it has already done, for it will

be concerned with the higher branches of the service. From the beginning it has been a work of public instruction in political morality and in the business-like conduct of public administration. It is that to-day; but it also teaches with new urgency that the moral success of republican institutions requires the complete eradication from all the public services of the spoils or patronage system of appointment and promotion.

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